

Testimony of Joe Howell
“Examining Local Perspectives on the No Child Left Behind Act”
Hearing before the House Committee on Education and Labor
Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education
Monday, May 14, 2007
Radnor High School
Radnor PA

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, good morning.

My name is Joe Howell and I am the principal of Norristown Area High School in nearby Norristown, PA. Our school serves approximately 1800 students who come to us from the borough of Norristown and the townships of East and West Norriton. According to a formula developed by the Philadelphia Inquirer newspaper for its annual Report Card on the Schools, Norristown is the most diverse public high school in the region: 47% African American, 38% white, 12% Hispanic, 62% free and reduced lunch. I have been a principal in the district since 1978 and have been at the high school since April, 2004.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you this morning.

In its current form of implementation, all 11th grade students at Norristown High spend three days in March taking the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) exams. During the summer we receive individual and school reports that provide us with sufficient data to identify individual student needs as well as the need for curriculum and program revisions. This data is also used to assign one of four categories of performance to our individual students: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient and Advanced in both reading and math. Student performance is further disaggregated into our significant sub-groups: Black, Hispanic, IEP and Economically Disadvantaged.

In that same time frame, the reading and math data are combined with graduation rate and test participation information and a final score is determined for our school: we either met AYP in all twelve categories or we didn't.

In our case, we have not and find ourselves in Corrective Action I after failing to do so four years in a row and subject to the same penalties and interventions assigned to all schools with the same designation. We also received \$9,500 in state and federal funds for the current school year because we are in Corrective Action.

This morning I respectfully suggest to you that there are two ways in which the implementation of NCLB could be of greater benefit to me, and of much greater consequence, to my constituents: students, parents and community.

First, include a value added reporting system. Value-added analysis is a statistical method used to measure the influence of a district and school on the academic progress

rates of individual students and groups of students from year-to-year. PVAAS, Pennsylvania's value added system, is a reliable measure of growth/ progress and is intended to serve as a complement to existing achievement measures to use for local decision-making as seen appropriate by the school district. Value-added analysis offers an objective and more precise way to measure student, cohort, and subgroup progress as the value schools and districts add to students' educational experiences. It also has a predictive component that is useful in helping to determine efficient deployment of support resources.

While I know how my students and school performed against the arbitrary 2005 – 2007 NCLB/AYP targets, I don't know reliably how they should have performed based on their previous performance. For example, I know that 60% of my total 11th grade population was advanced or proficient on the 2006 PSSA in reading. Was that a remarkable achievement on my part, about what it should have been given the education the students received for the three years since their last PSSA, or did attending Norristown High do some students harm, students who would have scored higher had they gone to school somewhere else? Without this additional data, the practice of comparing schools under the current system is invalid in my estimation unless all schools have the exact same student population. If a school that has met or exceeded the AYP targets is underachieving and a school in Corrective Action is shown to have "added value", is the reporting system meeting the goals established by the law?

NCLB contains a school choice component based on the comparisons of schools created by the AYP designations. The presumption is that a student who scores at the basic level in a Corrective Action school would benefit from a transfer to a school that has met AYP, because it is a better school. If all of my students transferred to a school that has met AYP and all of the receiving school's students transferred to Norristown High, would the outcomes be the same? Do the schools we are compared to enjoy the diversity that we do and do their scores include significant sub-groups as well? A value added system ends the discussion and, perhaps, results in a more accurate account of student and school performance. Including a value added system in the reauthorization of NCLB may be more acceptable nationally if school districts had the option of designating in advance whether to be rated on a value added or traditional system.

Second, I encourage the committee to consider adding a policy of differentiated reporting, consequences and interventions, particularly if a value added system is not included in the new measure.

For school year 2005 – 2006, Norristown High met three of the four targets: reading, graduation rate and participation rate. While we met the overall math goal, we did not meet the math target for our four sub-groups.

Since the 2004 – 2005 school year we have aggressively met the performance gap challenge through a variety of reform efforts. Through our partnership with the Panasonic Foundation we have attained the services of IRRE (Institute for Research and Reform in Education) and have adopted their high school reform program, First Things

First (small learning communities, family advocacy, curriculum and instruction professional development). We have received a Pennsylvania Project 720 grant and are in our second year of implementation (small learning communities, family advocacy, curriculum and instruction revision and dual enrollment). We have doubled the amount of time for English and math for our freshmen and sophomores and created our own quarterly testing in those two subjects. We have dramatically increased student access to technology supported instruction through a Pennsylvania Classrooms for the Future grant and added an instructional enhancement team (four instructional coaches) in large part thanks to our federal Small Learning Communities grant. We have eliminated tracking and study halls and have created more sheltered learning opportunities for our ESL population and will be instituting a rigorous internship program in the fall. We have substantially improved the quality and quantity of our professional development, supervision and evaluation.

Unfortunately, our Corrective Action I status overshadows our efforts. I propose that a school be able to request an amended NCLB status based on verifiable efforts to reform. This would allow for an accurate accounting of student performance while acknowledging that a school has employed a set of best practices in order to improve. Even a designation such as “Corrective Action I – school is actively engaged in an approved reform effort” would be a source of encouragement for students and teachers engaged in such an effort. In addition, consequences and interventions must be differentiated to account for the percentage of students tested who fall into one or more significant sub-group.

I would also suggest that \$9500 is not going to move any school from Corrective Action to a more positive place.

Finally, it has been my experience that the provisions of NCLB have had little or no impact on school safety and discipline in my school. While providing our diverse population with a safe and encouraging school climate remains a daily priority, the majority of the NCLB provisions have already been in place in our district for many years.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the committee this morning.